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SUBJECT: STREET CHILDREN: VIETNAM'S NOT SO HIDDEN
PROBLEM

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Summary

11. (SBU) Unreliable data, allegations of periodic government round-ups and employment in the black market and other illegal sectors are prominent features of Vietnam's street children problem. Although the GVN is quick to defend its record, many observers note that the government's slow development and implementation of programs aimed to care for and reduce the number of street children have left their care and rehabilitation mostly in the hands of private organizations. Vocational training programs implemented by NGOs have enjoyed some success in Hanoi and other metropolitan areas, notably at the grassroots level. End Summary.

"A Complex Issue"

12. (SBU) Vietnam was notably the first country in Asia, and second in the world, to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990. Yet, many believe that the GVN has failed in both its national and international responsibilities towards street children. The mantra of GVN officials when discussing the issue of street children is "it's a complex issue," with complex origins. Children end up on the streets for various reasons. According to the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), its "best guess" is that there are 23,000 street children in Vietnam, with 1,500 in Hanoi and almost 9,000 in Ho Chi Minh City alone. At times, the numbers appear to decrease in Hanoi, but Embassy contacts state that the decrease is deceiving because the children have either been rounded-up or moved into less visible areas. Others have simply migrated to other cities, our contacts note.

13. (SBU) Contributing to the problem is human trafficking, as well as family pressure for children, some as young as six years' old, to work outside the home for financial reasons. Often, families network with others in the community to send their children off to work. But, according to an official with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there is a "certain amount of deception" when it comes to the promised level of care, schooling and opportunity for those children entrusted to others, often organized criminal elements or those in the black market. The children sometimes start by begging for money, but their work for the most part consists of selling lottery tickets, books, flowers, vegetables, gum or newspapers, and shining shoes. According to IOM, some of these children end up being trafficked, both domestically and across the border. To prevent this, UNICEF has carried out training programs for the Border Guard Command and worked with the

Women's Union.

"A Long History" of Round-Ups

¶4. (SBU) In a November 2006 Human Rights Watch report, the organization alleged that the GVN routinely rounds up street children in arbitrary sweeps and places them in detention centers. The report detailed round-up campaigns conducted in advance of prominent State visits, national holidays and international meetings, including before the 2003 South East Asian (SEA) Games, 2004 Asia-Europe Summit Meeting (ASEM) and, most recently, before the November 2006 APEC Summit in Hanoi. The GVN vehemently denied HRW's report, calling it a "complete fabrication." However, Embassy NGO contacts agreed that the number of detainees at these centers increased by as much as three times both prior to APEC and during other high-level events. IOM tells us that Vietnam has "a long history" of rounding up "undesirables," and that all are at risk when a major event is coming.

¶5. (SBU) The Hanoi-based NGO, the Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender, Family, Women and Adolescents (CSAGA), blames the round-ups on both a lack of training and a lack of communication within the GVN. When directed to deal with the issue, police merely round up the children, and report back that their job is done: the street children have been removed. Because the detention centers are not part of the criminal justice system, court orders are not required for children and others to be rounded up and detained there. According to our contacts, more often than not, once the children are released, they return to the streets.

Rehabilitation Centers or "De Facto Jails"

¶6. (SBU) The two main government rehabilitation centers in Hanoi are overseen by the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA), with the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) also playing a major role. Opinions on the conditions at the centers vary greatly.

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Human Rights Watch alleges that these centers do not meet the standards set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Additionally, HRW claims that children detained in these centers are subject to "routine beatings, verbal abuse and mistreatment by staff." HRW further alleges that the centers do nothing to rehabilitate the street children, and are in fact "de facto jails." (Note: The two centers are under the management of MOLISA, and also provide support for women and children of needy situations/in difficulty. End Note.)

¶7. (SBU) However, IOM staff, who have visited the centers, describe them as very basic and very structured. While agreeing that the centers are sparse, IOM staff questioned the abuse allegations, opining that many of the children in the centers are simply not used to the rigid controls and structured days. Our contacts note that many of the children detained in these centers have committed petty crimes, such as pick-pocketing and theft, and so are already resistant to authority and rules.

GVN Slow to Act...

¶8. (SBU) Contacts from the GVN's Commission for Population, Family and Children, MOLISA and the Hanoi Department of Labor told Poloff that that, at present, there are 47 government and private organizations that provide different kinds of support for children in needy situations. The children who receive this support are not only street children, but also disabled children or children with special family backgrounds.

¶9. (SBU) However, the CSAGA Director told Poloff that the GVN "pays little attention" to street children. She opined that, in Hanoi, the GVN does not want to help street children out of fear that not only will it create a magnet effect for other street children, but also use up financial resources on "non-Hanoians." This sentiment was echoed by other Embassy contacts, who reported that an

inter-agency disagreement over demographics and who is deserving of any proposed benefits has resulted in the slow implementation of government projects. IOM representatives stated the GVN recognizes there is a problem, but is challenged by its inability to gauge the extent of it and how best to respond.

¶10. (SBU) In addition, because social work is a new concept in Vietnam, health professionals are not yet adequately trained to deal with psychiatric issues faced by street children, nor do the government's existing "drop in centers" have the means to cope with them. (Note: Initially, there were 16 such centers established throughout Hanoi that provided: counseling on children's rights; referral and information on issues such as health care, education and vocational training; recreational activities; and advice on problem solving. However, almost half of these centers have ceased operating. End Note.) Existing GVN legislation appears to adequately address the needs of street children, but a lack of enforcement and an inability to actualize the ideas behind the legislation remain obstacles to ensuring children receive the protection and rehabilitation needed.

...But NGOs Stepping Up

¶11. (SBU) Embassy contacts agree that street children need "living skills." Training programs funded and run by NGOs, designed to help secure future jobs, have enjoyed great success throughout Hanoi and are helping to fill the gap created by a lack of official action. CSAGA has implemented a pilot project in Haiphong, with funding from the World Bank, to provide living skills to street children, who range from age 12 to 16. The children receive vocational training in photography and art.

¶12. (SBU) Citibank has helped to fund several three-month vocational training programs for over 132 street children in Hanoi. The local NGO "Blue Dragon" also provides skills training to children, with an emphasis on enabling them to return to school and ensuring that they receive social skills. KOTO ("Know One, Teach One"), a popular Hanoi restaurant, provides street children with skills they can use in the restaurant industry; many KOTO graduates now work in some of Hanoi's major hotels. KOTO has opened up a second restaurant in Hanoi, with plans for more in other areas. HCMC also has a number of youth centers, such as the 15 May School, that are GVN-run but strongly supported by NGOs and businesses, both domestic and foreign. But, like in Hanoi, their capacity is well below the demand.

Comment

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¶13. (SBU) While the work done by domestic and international NGOs and others to protect and assist street children is significant, it is not enough. Without adequate government implementation of existing legislation and guidelines for the rights and protection of street children, periodic round-ups will likely remain the sole notable feature of the GVN's street children policy.

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